

“What the Hell?”

Luke 1: 39-45, Matt. 12: 38-41, I Peter 3: 18-20

December 2nd, 2007 Advent 1 at Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids Mi
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I. Mary Goes

Christmas is coming, and people are visiting relatives. In our first reading today, we find that Mary is going somewhere too. She is leaving her home, visiting her relatives, Elizabeth.

Why is Mary going to Elizabeth? It isn't really good news that she is with child out of wedlock is it? Is Mary actually leaving her town in fear, going alone into hiding away at a relative's house in another town as her belly starts to swell and her marriage is not yet consummated? There must have been some trepidation on her part; since stoning was the usual price to be paid for Jewish girls who get the “marriage first -- then motherhood” order backwards. But Mary was taking a risk to follow the instructions of the most high God. In her humanness, there must have been some strategic adjustment of her clothing and great anxiety in front of the neighbors.

But there is amazement too. And even now the supernatural implications come busting into her daily life. When Mary entered the house of her relatives, The Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth; and instantly there was recognition. The divine presence in Mary's womb was felt. It had an immediate impact on Elizabeth and her unborn son John. In that moment, the presence of the divine worked a change in the spiritual orientation of Elizabeth. Like a compass swinging to the North; the human spirits were pulled toward the Holy One of Israel who had come to them where they were.

II. Jesus Goes

Jesus, our God who is coming to earth is going somewhere too. This journey would ultimately lead him through the entire cast of human experiences: of birth, life and death. This journey would even lead him to hell and back.

In our ongoing series on the Apostles' Creed, today we come to a particular phrase concerning Jesus. “He descended into hell.” There are many churches that leave that phrase out when reciting the creed.¹ And this is not without good reason.

The first thing that we must know about this phrase is that it is late to come into acceptance as part of the Apostles' Creed. Rufinus, a theologian who lived about 400 AD explicitly states that the phrase, “He descended into hell” was not in the Roman Creed of 200 AD but came from the bishop in the very independently minded see of Aqualia, the area near Venice.²

¹ Apostles Creed Usage. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27_Creed

² New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01629a.htm>

John Calvin agreed with this view and stated that this phrase “Was inserted after a time, and did not become customary in the churches at once, but gradually.”³ The Catholic Church teaches that this phrase was not officially accepted as the teaching of the councils until 1215 AD⁴. It is good for us to know that this most controversial phrase in the creed was not completely agreed on in the past, and thus we should not be surprised that it is not universally agreed upon in the present.

The second thing to know about this phrase is the earliest Greek form of the Apostle’s Creeds that has it has: κατελθόντα εις τα κατώτατα⁵ (He descended to the lowest place/ underworld) Thus, a better translation of the phrase, “He descended into hell” would be that Jesus, “Descended to the dead.” Therefore, we should not be surprised that there are many churches who choose to use the ecumenical version when they are reciting the Apostle’s creed and they say unison, “He descended to the dead.”

Now, the Reformed family of churches rarely talks about hell. Since we are not trying to scare anyone into our pews, or trying to motivate each other into correct behavior by threatening punishment from God; we are more likely to speak of the joys of heaven rather than the existence of Hell. And because we don’t talk about it, we as Reformed people do not have a consensus about what Hell is.

By not talking about Hell we have allowed the word Hell to become appropriated by the secular world. When you think about it, “What the Hell” is really a very deep theological question. What exactly is Hell anyway? And if you accept this late adopted phrase to the Apostle’s creed and believe that Jesus “Descended into Hell” or even “Descended to the Dead.” You ought to be able to explain what you mean by that.

But what is Hell?

- a) When the word Hell is used, many of the mental pictures from Dante’s inferno from the Divine Comedy come to mind. In that vision of hell, there are nine layers; each one more terrible than the next. Dante describes people being whipped by demons, or immersed in a lake of burning pitch. Each person in this place is described suffering under cruel punishments suitable to their crime.⁶ --

³ John Calvin. Institutes of Christian Religion.
http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html

⁴ “He Descended into Hell” Lecture by Pope John Paul II.
<http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=5549>

⁵ This is basic Greek. For Greek and Latin versions see: <http://www.answers.com/topic/harrowing-of-hell>
or Terminology. Harrowing of Hell. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowing_of_Hell

⁶ This website has an interesting interactive Dantean Hell description: <http://web.eku.edu/flash/inferno/>

- But Dante's inferno was written in the early 1300's.⁷ Not very long after "He descended into hell" was officially accepted into the creed. To project these Dantaen visions onto the Hell onto the New Testament is anachronistic. These are visions of Hell that came into being much later than the vision of Hell that Christ preached to among the people of in first century.
- b) How was the first century worldview shaped? If we go back to an older version of Hell, we find the ancient Jewish view of the underworld was Sheol.⁸ --A place where all of the dead go to be judged, and of Ghenna, (a word which the Hebrews also used to describe the dump where garbage was burned.) Ghenna, was a temporary place of purification. In it sinners would be purified by fire for usually up to a year, but only some very terrible people would be there for eternity.⁹
- c) But also in the first century, the view of Hell that would have been popularly known was the always evolving idea of the Greek underworld. The Greek view of the underworld had the pit of Tartarus, the River Styx, the ferryman Charon and the land of the dead ruled by the God Hades.¹⁰ In the first century everyone had a three layered view of the physical world (with heaven above, Hell underneath the earth, and earth as a plane in the middle¹¹) thus we should not be surprised when Jesus speaks of descending to the depths of the earth in Matthew 12 when describing his upcoming death. It was an accurate picture how people in the first century believed the world to be.
- d) But what do we believe that Hell is now, in the twenty first century? The Barna group has done some research on that. Of those who believe in Hell, 32 % of Christians believe that hell is a physical place where God punishes sinners for eternity, (something which reminds us very much of Dante or the Greek Underworld) and 39% believe that Hell is a state of eternal separation from God's presence.¹²

⁷ Good discussion on life of Dante and context of the inferno:
<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/inferno/context.html>

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheol>

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gehenna>

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hades>

¹¹ Brent Meeker, *Cosmology and Cosmogony of Ancient Civilizations*. http://www.mukto-mona.com/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/brent_meeker/cosmology.htm

¹² Barna Group. "Americans Describe their views about Life after Death." 2003.
<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=150>

How could Hell be a state of being?

Both the Roman Catholic Church¹³ and *The Handbook of Christian Apologetics* from InterVarsity Press¹⁴ describe hell as a state of being, not as a physical place. Just as darkness is defined as the absence of light, so is hell defined as the absence of God. hell is described as a place that is self chosen, with a lost soul being characterized as someone who has rejected everything that is not simply themselves. People who believe that hell is a state of being remind us that any soul that refuses the One Source of life and joy will find only death and misery.

CS. Lewis in the seventh book in the Chronicles of Narnia Series, *The Last Battle* describes what happens when the Dwarves (who are only for the dwarves) find themselves beyond the stable door and into the afterworld in the land of Aslan, the Lion; who is the God metaphor in the books:

Aslan raised his head and shook his mane. Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the Dwarves knees: pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand, but it wasn't much use; they couldn't taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a Stable. One said that he was trying to eat hay, and another said that he had got a bit of an old turnip and a third said that he'd found a raw cabbage leaf. And they raised golden goblets of rich red wine to their lips and said, "Ugh. Fancy drinking dirty water out of a trough that a donkey's been at. Never thought that we'd come to this."... [Aslan explained what was happening to Lucy,] "You see," said Aslan. "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."¹⁵

Descending into Hell

With the differing views of Hell that people have, it is not surprising that what follows from that is that there are many different interpretations of the phrase "He descended into hell."

a) The first interpretation is the simplest. Jesus had to go to the place of the dead because he actually died, and was dead between Friday and Sunday was and not just dead for a brief 30 second heart stopping out of body experience. Thus, the phrase "He descended into hell" merely means that Jesus was actually completely dead.¹⁶

¹³ Roman Catholic Church, beliefs and practices.

<http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/catholicdenom.htm>

And Roman Catholic Catechism . <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/art12.html#HELL>

¹⁴ Kreeft and Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. InterVarsity Press. Downers Grove. 1994. pg. 280-312.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Last Battle*. Book 7 in the Chronicles of Narnia. New York: MacMillian, 1970 Pg.147-148.

¹⁶ Dr. Dodds .*Exposition of the Apostles Creed*. Article 5.

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html. 1896.

b) The second interpretation of this phrase is from the Heidelberg Catechism. In this interpretation, Jesus' descent into Hell was only a metaphorical description of the agony that he suffered on the cross. This suffering by Jesus saved us from the "anguish and torments of Hell."¹⁷

c) This is similar, but not identical to John Calvin's interpretation of the Christ's descent into hell. According to Calvin, an **actual descent** by Christ into an **actual hell** was necessary for all Christians' **atonement**, because Christ did in fact need to endure the penalty of that torment for the sins of the redeemed.¹⁸

d) The last view of Christ's descent into Hell is a theological premise known as, "The Harrowing of Hell." It is most strongly based on a tricky reference in 1 Peter 3 to Christ "preaching to those who are in prison."¹⁹ This argument describes all the prisoners of Hell as like those who, in the days of Noah, turned their backs to God. --There is a rich tradition that has grown up around this theological theme of the Harrowing of Hell²⁰, with artistic depictions of Christ breaking down Hell's gates, or Christ leading a procession of saints beginning with Adam and Eve out of a fiery pit.²¹

Now, why would it be important for Jesus to bring the light of his love to hell? Even if you believe that Hell is a state of being absent from God; and not a physical place; I find that there is a great comfort in believing that there is no place in the universe that the sacrificial love of Jesus did not touch.

Even John Calvin understands the importance of such a theological position. He stated of the people in hell, "I readily admit that Christ shone upon them with the power of his Spirit, enabling them to realize that the grace which they had only tasted in hope was then manifested to the world."²²

¹⁷ Heidelberg Catechism. Question 44.

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg_intro.html

¹⁸ Calvin, John. Institutes of Christian Religion.

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html

¹⁹ Lockerbie, *The Apostles Creed: Do You Really Believe it?* Victor Books, 1977.

<http://www.creeds.net/ancient/descendit.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07143d.htm> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowing_of_hell

²¹ To see various images, follow this link:

http://images.google.com/images?q=Harrowing+of+Hell&hl=en&rlz=1T4SKPB_en_208_208&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=X&oi=images&ct=title

²² Calvin, John, Institutes of Christian Religion. "Apostles Creed: Christ Descended into Hell" (sentence referenced by footnote 438).

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html This idea seems to have some Zwinglian influence. Zwingli, *Exposition of the Faith*, section on

There is something very reassuring in knowing that when you die; there you will see the face of Jesus is there, asking you to love.²³ --Begging you to set aside the lie that your life is more important than others, and opening yourself to the power of self sacrificial love.

Just as when Mary entered the house of Elizabeth, and her spirit swung like a compass to worship and praise that amazing presence of Christ; so too I believe that the presence of Christ exists in the realm of the dead calling "whosoever will" into a relationship. It is only those who refuse that invitation, those who choose to live for themselves who cut themselves off from God. By their own choice they reject the source of love and purpose, and live in a hell of spiritual misery; the kind of death that is separation from the most high God.

III. Where Are You Going?

So this advent season, where are you going? Are you like Mary? Afraid perhaps of what others may think, but still going forward and following the call of Christ? Have you been in the presence of the most high God and felt your soul swing like a compass needle toward the embodiment of eternal love on earth?

This advent, are you giving up your own comforts and your own status to bring a greater light to the world? Or are you so worried about not being taken in, that you cannot take that step and believe that the God of the universe loves you? Do you choose your selfish life this Christmas or are you using this season of giving to self sacrificially give to others?

Ultimately, when it comes to the end of your life, do you know where you are going? I pray that you do. Amen.

"Christ the Lord"

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html

²³ Dr. Richard R. Crocker, PhD. Dartmouth. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~tucker/rs1/sermons/2004-10-14.html>

Other Interesting Works of Note on this Topic

Harry Eberts, *We Believe. A Study of the Book of Confessions for Church Officers.* Geneva Press: 1986

Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone.* “Concerning the Conflict of the Good with the Evil Principle of Sovereignty Over Man.” New York: Harper Torch Books. 1934. Pg. 50-53.

C.S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* “Hell” pg. 118-128. New York: Macmillan. 1986

Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death,* Abington. 1961.

Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds. A Guide to the Book of Confessions.* Westminster: 1985.

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